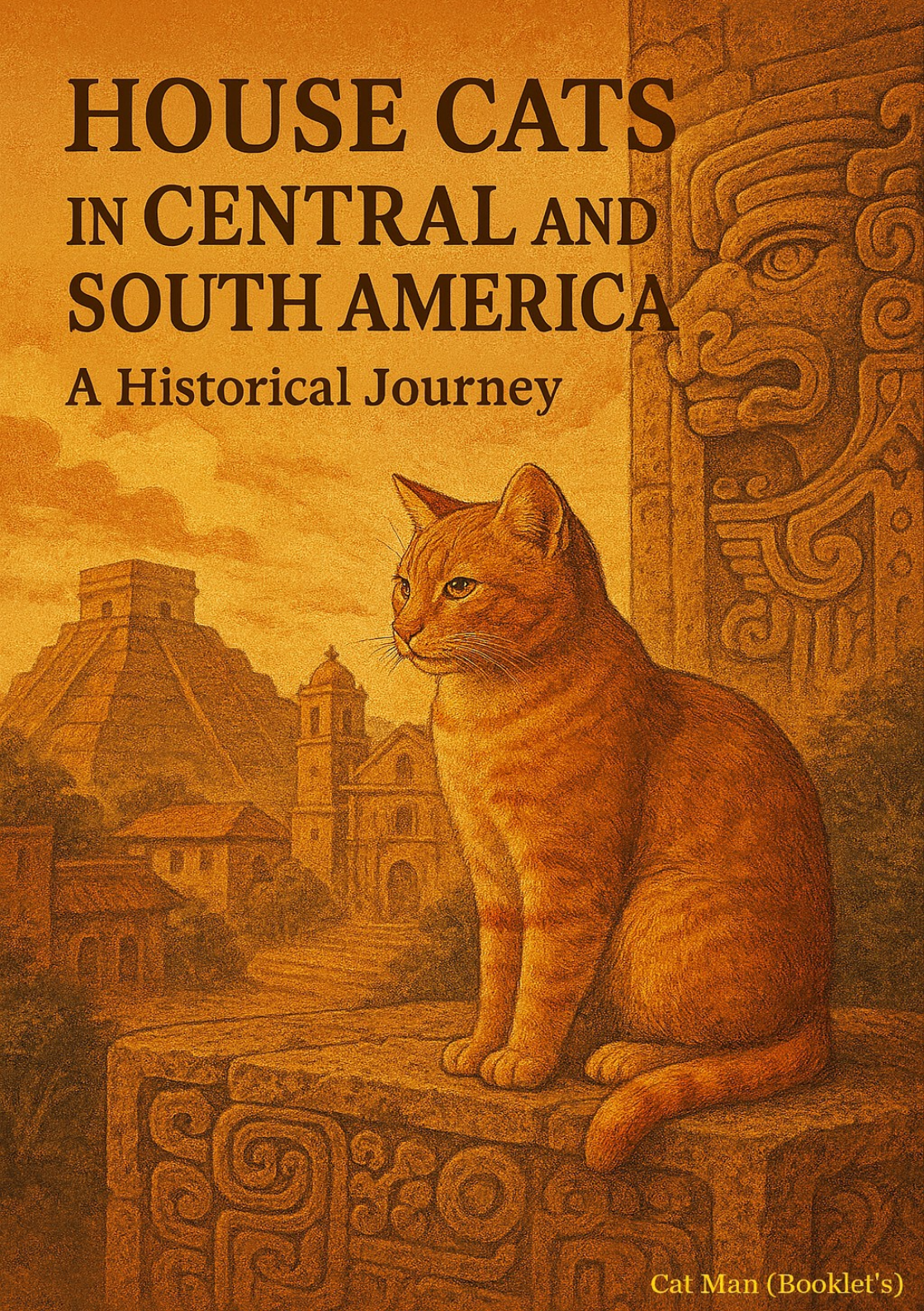
HOUSE CATS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

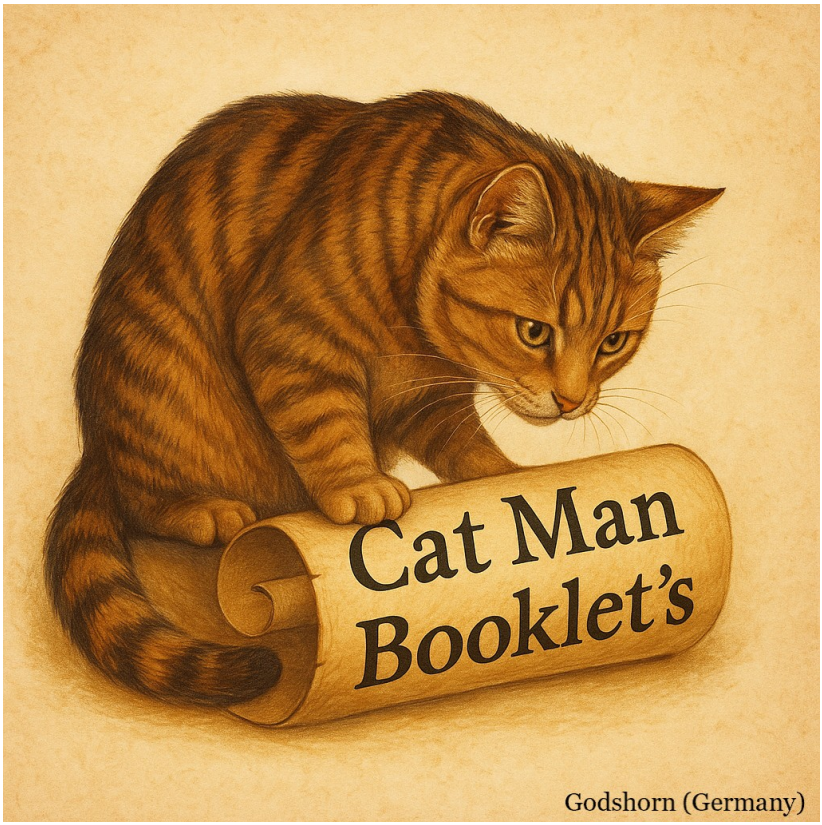
A Historical Journey



Cat Man (Booklet's)

House Cats in Central and South America

A Historical Journey



1. Introduction

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is one of the most widespread animal species in the world and has a long history of interaction with humans. Its domestication began around 10,000 years ago in the Near East, from where it eventually spread across the globe.
This booklet focuses specifically on the history of domestic cats in Central and South America—regions with unique ecological and cultural contexts. It examines the arrival of cats, their spread and adaptation, their cultural significance, and their ecological impact.

2. The Colonial Arrival Aboard the Ships

The arrival of domestic cats in Central and South America took place during the European colonial period, mainly between the 14th and 18th centuries. Cats were not native to the Americas; before colonization, the region's only felines were larger wild species such as mountain lions, jaguars, ocelots, and lynxes.

Domestic cats were introduced by European colonists, primarily Spaniards and Portuguese. They were brought across the Atlantic on ships, often as "ship cats," valued for keeping rodent populations under control both on board and in newly founded settlements.

Christopher Columbus and early settlers contributed to bringing cats into the New World. Their practical purpose was clear: protecting stored food and reducing vermin on ships and in colonial outposts. In the early phases of colonization, cats were viewed more as working animals than as companions.

Their introduction was closely tied to the needs of European colonization and the constant threat of rodents. This marked the beginning of their gradual integration into the ecosystems of Central and South America.

The broader context of the Columbian Exchange highlights how European ships transported people, goods, and animals—both intentionally, such as livestock and working animals, and unintentionally, such as rats and mice.

Domestic cats belonged to the intentionally transported animals, valued for their usefulness during long sea voyages and in the precarious early settlements where food security was essential.

3. Across Continents and Climates Spread and Adaptation

Domestic cats spread throughout the different regions of Central and South America along the routes of European colonization and trade. Genetic studies show a clear correlation between the present-day distribution of cat populations in Latin America and the historical patterns of colonization from the 14th to the 18th century.

The Iberian Peninsula—Spain and Portugal—is considered the primary source of many Latin American cat populations. Cats arrived via Atlantic routes to the Caribbean and Brazil, as well as Pacific routes along the west coast of South America. From there, they moved farther inland through Spanish expeditions searching for resources such as silver in Bolivia, and along trade routes connecting major cities like Buenos Aires.

Later migrations also contributed to the region's genetic diversity. For example, the movement of Catalan workers into the Amazon brought additional mixing into specific local populations, indicating continuing introductions even after the initial colonial waves.

Adaptation to different environments was shaped by factors such as the founder effect and genetic drift in isolated populations. These processes may have produced unique genetic traits in places like La Paz, Bolivia. Selective pressures—such as strong sunlight in certain regions—may explain the higher frequency of the white-spotting allele (S) in some areas, suggesting potential adaptive advantages.

Cats proved highly adaptable, thriving in forests, grasslands, urban settlements, and island environments. Observations from Brazil show that cats adjusted their diets and behavior to match locally available resources, demonstrating their ability to succeed in a wide range of ecological settings.

Human movement played a major role in shaping the distribution and diversity of cats across the region. The strong connection between genetic markers and historic trade and migration routes underscores that humans were the primary drivers of the species' expansion throughout the Americas.

The founder effect in remote regions suggests that small initial populations adapted to local conditions, leading over time to distinct differences. Possible selective pressures—such as climate and habitat—further influenced traits like coat coloration, showing how cats continued to adjust to the environments they encountered.

4. Before the Europeans
Felines in Indigenous Cultures

Before the arrival of Europeans, felines played an important role in the cultures of Indigenous peoples across Central and South America—though domestic cats (*Felis catus*) were not present in the region at all. Instead, native wild cat species held deep symbolic, spiritual, and cultural significance.

Jaguars were especially prominent in Maya and Aztec traditions. They symbolized power, divinity, and the forces of the night and the underworld. Jaguars were often linked to kingship, warrior elites, and shamanic transformation.

In the Andes, the puma held an equally important position. It was sometimes seen as a guide or soul-taker and was closely tied to Inca cosmology, representing the middle world and embodying strength, authority, and balance.

Other native felines appeared throughout regional traditions.

Ocelots were associated with warfare and sacrificial rituals in Maya culture and were linked to deities of agriculture and fertility.

Margays, known for their agility and tree-dwelling behavior, appeared in Brazilian folklore as bringers of good fortune and in Aztec tradition as messengers of agricultural gods. Some Maya communities associated them with the rain god Chaac.

Jaguarundis were, according to a few accounts, sometimes tamed by early Central American groups for rodent control, although they were never domesticated in a true sense.

No widespread evidence suggests that small wild cat species were domesticated in pre-Columbian America—likely because many Indigenous societies did not store large amounts of grain or food that required protection from rodents.

Artistic depictions from the Andes occasionally show feline figures wearing collars or leads, suggesting a symbolic closeness or ritualized relationship, even if not true domestication.

Indigenous cultures had a longstanding spiritual connection with their native wild cats. These animals were seen as intermediaries between worlds, symbols of power, and embodiments of natural and supernatural forces. Their strong cultural presence highlights how dramatically the ecological landscape changed when Europeans introduced a completely new feline species into territories already rich with their own sacred and symbolic cats.

5. From Utility to Companionship Changing Perceptions

The perception and status of domestic cats in Central and South America have changed markedly since the colonial era. At first, cats were kept primarily as working animals, valued for controlling rodents in settlements, on ships, and on farms. Only gradually—over many generations—did they begin to take on the role of household companions, similar to developments seen in Europe and North America, though the timing and pace of this shift varied from region to region.

In modern times, cats have become increasingly popular as pets in many Latin American cities. Contributing factors include smaller urban living spaces and the relatively low maintenance required compared to dogs—trends that reflect broader global patterns of urbanization. The growing "humanization" of pets, in which animals are viewed as family members and receive greater investment in their care, has also taken hold throughout parts of the region.

Preferences for pets still differ across Latin America. In some areas, dogs have traditionally been more popular, yet the number of cat owners continues to rise. One indication of changing attitudes is the increased sale of cat litter and indoor-cat products in major cities, suggesting a shift toward keeping cats more frequently indoors.

However, negative attitudes or mistreatment still occur in certain communities, sometimes influenced by cultural beliefs, economic limitations, or limited access to veterinary resources.

Overall, the role of domestic cats has shifted from primarily utilitarian to increasingly companion-based. This evolution reflects wider social changes and a strengthening human–animal bond, even as regional histories and cultural nuances continue to shape how cats are perceived and cared for today.

6. Whispers in the Stories
Folklore and Myth

The appearance of domestic cats in the folklore, myths, and religious traditions of Central and South America after colonization is far less documented than the rich mythologies surrounding native wild cats. The available information offers no detailed accounts of distinctly Latin American folklore centered on domestic cats, but it clearly highlights the strong symbolic roles that wild feline species played—and how these may have influenced later perceptions of the newly introduced house cat.

One example sometimes mentioned in modern folklore is the *Hombre Gato* ("Cat Man") from Argentina, a legend describing a human–feline hybrid predator. This stands in sharp contrast to the complex pre-Columbian traditions built around jaguars, pumas, and other wild cats, which were often revered as powerful spiritual beings.

European settlers brought their own beliefs and superstitions with them, including associations between black cats and bad luck, witchcraft, or omens. These ideas likely blended into local cultures over time, shaping attitudes in ways that differed from Indigenous traditions. However, there is no strong evidence that domestic cats were integrated into Indigenous religious systems or syncretic spiritual practices during the colonial or post-colonial periods.

Before European arrival, domestic cats had no established place in Indigenous stories at all. Wild cats, on the other hand—especially jaguars and pumas—were deeply embedded in ritual, mythology, and artistic expression. Their symbolic power was so strong that the introduced domestic cat never developed a comparable mythological status.

Further research focusing specifically on regional folklore involving domestic cats would be needed to fully understand their presence—or absence—in oral traditions across Central and South America.

Cemetery Recoleta, Buenos Aires

7. A World of Cats
Global Historical Context

The history of domestic cats in Central and South America shares similarities with—yet also differs from—their history in other parts of the world. Cat domestication began around 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent. From there, cats spread to Egypt, where they were revered, protected, and even deified. This early global foundation shaped the species' long relationship with humans.

Their arrival and role in Europe were more complex. During the Middle Ages, cats were sometimes associated with witchcraft, yet in later centuries they became valued companions and household animals. Similar to Central and South America, cats reached North America with European colonists, initially as working animals for pest control. Over time, they transitioned into beloved pets, and their populations increased significantly.

One distinctive aspect of the Central and South American context is the coexistence of domestic cats with a longstanding cultural reverence for native wild feline species. Jaguars, pumas, ocelots, and other wild cats already held powerful symbolic positions in pre-Columbian belief systems. This created a cultural landscape very different from regions where cats had little symbolic presence before domestication.

Genetic studies suggest that multiple introduction waves of domestic cats correspond to specific European colonization routes. This pattern appears more varied than in some other regions.
In contrast to Europe and North America—where selective breeding eventually produced recognized cat breeds—Central and South America did not develop similarly distinct native breeds. The possible exception is the Brazilian Shorthair, though its lineage also traces back to European introductions.

While the early functional role of cats in the Americas resembled that of North America, the preexisting symbolic importance of native wild cats likely shaped their cultural integration differently. The absence of widespread selective breeding in Latin America may reflect varying cultural priorities, environmental pressures, or the already diverse gene pool resulting from several waves of introduction.

Taken together, the broader global history of domestication helps illuminate how and why domestic cats became established in the Americas. Comparing regional contexts highlights unique aspects of human–cat relationships, including the ways in which existing cultural traditions and ecological conditions shaped the role of the domestic cat in Central and South America.

8. A Shadow on Biodiversity
Impacts on Native Wildlife

The introduction of domestic cats has had significant ecological consequences for the native wildlife of Central and South America. As a non-native species brought by humans, domestic cats are considered invasive in the Americas. Their impact on local ecosystems includes predation, competition, and the transmission of diseases to native animals.

Cats are highly effective hunters, even when well fed. They prey on small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians—species that often have no natural defenses against this new predator. Studies from Brazil document predation on a wide range of native animals as well as the transmission of diseases. In the Caribbean, the extinction of the Hispaniolan edible rat has been directly linked to introduced cats. In Colombia, domestic and feral cats contribute to bird and vertebrate mortality in both rural and urban settings.

Research across South America remains less extensive than in regions such as Australia or North America, but the available evidence strongly suggests comparable ecological pressure. The presence of domestic cats has contributed to population declines—and in some cases the disappearance—of native species.

Competition with native wild felines may also occur, although available information indicates that predators such as ocelots and pumas sometimes hunt feral cats, potentially offering limited natural control in certain areas.

Overall, domestic cats have exerted a substantial negative influence on native biodiversity in Central and South America. Their presence has contributed to species declines, and the full extent of their ecological impact is still not fully understood. More research is needed across the region's diverse ecosystems, especially in species-rich habitats where the effects of introduced predators can be severe.

9. Life on the Edge
The Phenomenon of Feral Cats

In both urban and rural areas of Central and South America, populations of feral domestic cats have formed over time. These populations grew as a result of abandonment, lack of sterilization, and the survival of offspring from free-roaming pets.

Feral cats have clear ecological consequences. Their hunting behavior places significant pressure on native wildlife, as they remain highly effective predators even without human care. They also pose a risk of transmitting diseases to native species, pets, and humans. Studies in Honduras, for example, show high prevalence rates of illnesses such as toxoplasmosis among feral cat populations.

In urban environments, colonies often develop near reliable food sources and shelter—such as the well-known cat colony at the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires. Managing these populations can involve Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs, which are carried out by community groups and local volunteers in some regions.

Native predators such as ocelots and pumas may hunt feral cats in certain areas, which can offer a degree of natural population control. However, this effect is limited and cannot replace human-led management.

Feral cat populations present a significant ecological challenge across the region. They contribute to biodiversity loss and raise concerns about disease transmission. Effective management requires strategies that balance animal welfare with the protection of native ecosystems, alongside responsible pet ownership and sustained community involvement.

10. Conclusion

The history of domestic cats in Central and South America is shaped by their arrival during the colonial era as practical working animals and their gradual transformation into companions—and, at the same time, into an invasive species with ecological consequences. The contrast between introduced domestic cats and the deeply rooted cultural and spiritual significance of native wild cats highlights how dramatically the region's ecological and cultural landscapes changed after European contact.

Today, domestic cats are widespread throughout the region, valued as pets in many communities while also contributing to the decline of native wildlife species. Their impact on biodiversity underscores the importance of responsible pet ownership, including sterilization and limiting outdoor access, as well as well-managed approaches to feral cat populations.

Future research could focus on understanding the long-term ecological effects of feral cats across the region's diverse ecosystems, exploring how domestic cats have—or have not—been integrated into local folklore, and evaluating the effectiveness of different management strategies. Together, these efforts can help balance animal welfare, cultural perspectives, and the protection of native species in Central and South America.

For your notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)